

"DE-COLONIZATION OF THE MIND, DO YOU DIG WHERE I'M COMIN FROM?"

An Interview with Melvin van Peebles

by Howard Pearlstein

Back in the days when people spoke of TV in terms of "Who's got one?" Milton Berle used to get in drag, have some off-the-wall freak come up to him and say, "Melvin." "Mellllvinnnnnn?" was Aunt Miltie's response, mixed with just the right combination of horror, fear, hysterm, repulsion and just plain old Mr. Television obnoxiousness to get a laugh. (One great thing Uncle Miltie did, back then, for opening up alternative racial consciousness. He made you ashamed to be anything he was ... including white.) Anyway, mention the name Van Peebles to any one of an assortment of Hollywood film people these days, and you get a similar agonized reaction, only this time it's not for laughs.

Melvin Van Peebles has released a film, a book, and an LP, all of them entitled *SWEET SWEETBACK'S BAADASSS SONG*. The film has broken box office records everywhere it's played — with little or no advance publicity — coming in behind *LOVE STORY* ... close behind. This, for a number of reasons, causes the hysterics in Tinsel Town. Done completely outside the normal film circuit on a nowhere budget, and with a small crew of Third World People, some from porn, others totally inexperienced, the film is totally baffling to rich white Hollywood in all but one aspect ... gargantuan box office. A combination like that, to the barons of BIG equipment/BIG stars/BIG budget, works considerably faster than prunes and milk of magnesia combined.

Add to that, one book which is an extension of the film (as the film is an extension of the man — not autobiographical ... metaphysical — an extension of essence) and which tells, as they say in the dailies, ALL, naming names ... those fine people in the Film Industry wouldn't do anything they'd be ashamed to see in print, would they? The book, unlike most others of the type, is more than a rehash of the film. It starts all the way back, at the beginning ... a meat-beating invocation of the Muse in the Mojave Desert, and goes all the way through ... through money hassles (I'm-Liberal-but-we've-already-done-one-black-movie-what-do-you-people-want?), through union hassles, the busting of his crew (for being black) in righteous old LA, the pro-

duction scenes ... serving as a get-it-together manual for would-be Third World filmmakers, with adequate warning as to what sort of shit flies when one tries to be relevant.

And the the LP ... just about the first soundtrack I've heard which is the film, since Van Peebles didn't just tack it on ... the music is as integral a part of the film as is black life and language.

Three right-on shots, which, coming in the wake of a year of critical rips interspersed with Joe-Namath-Super Bowl type comment, have not served to endear Van Peebles to the Industry as a whole. If he had fucked up, they'd love him ... they'd kick him, but they'd love him.

Which is not to say that *SWEET SWEETBACK'S BAADASSS SONG* is the greatest movie ever, or even in the running. If it were, it would probably not be seen at ALL. It's just to say that Melvin Van Peebles has produced a good, strong, honest hunk of raw meat of a film which knocks you back at first, then gets you sitting up and has you walking out of the theater wondering why you never saw it before, since you've seen it before, but pretended not to, since seeing it would demand change. (Do I presume the reader is white? I guess I do, since ghetto black viewers shout "Right On" ... don't seem surprised at all.) But, as mentioned, the reality, the brutality of the vision would demand the kind of change most people absolutely refuse to allow until necessity drags them kicking and screaming awake. Which may be why the press (white, black bourgeois, head, etc.) is trying so hard to put it down. There are no heroes, including Sweetback. There are no virtues, including strength, which comes through as pure necessity. And there is no 'niceness' — that's a luxury which doesn't exist in this vision.

Van Peebles prologues the book with a traditional medieval one ... "... Sire, these lines are not a homage to brutality that the artist has invented, but a hymn from the mouth of reality." In conversation, he frequently punctuates raps with an inquiring, "Hm? You dig where I'm comin' from?" Apparently, a lot of people can't.



(The larger portion of the following interview was done at a press conference in the Fairmount Hotel in San Francisco (The Fairmount? The fucking Grey-Line Tour Fairmount?), which may have to do with some of the strange vibes present. For purposes of simplicity, the various other questioners are listed en masse as PRESS.

*The latter portion was taped two days later.)
Read on. . . read on.*

VAN PEEBLES: The season that I called it SWEET SWEETBACK'S BAADASSS SONG was that I feel the medium, or in this case, the title, is part of the message. I mean it's not the same as calling it "Sweetback Against the Establishment" or so forth. I mean the cat's a badass. . . why get into all the rhetoric of the Man. Just tell it like it is through the language of what it's supposed to be about. Hey, you say SWEET SWEETBACK'S BAADASSS SONG, you don't have to say any more, I feel.

ORGAN: A lot of people who make movies have been put very uptight that you've been saying they don't know how to make film.

VAN PEEBLES: By the very fact man, that dig, I had 19 people in my entire crew and we made this film. 50% of which you could call advanced students, and of that well, 25% were very advanced students but who had never made a feature before, at all, and 25 other percent who had never even seen a camera before. The rest of the people were a porn crew. Now this film is next to LOVE STORY man, talkin about proportional grosses at the fuckin box office wherever I'm playin. I'm second to LOVE STORY.

PRESS: How much was the budget?

VAN PEEBLES: I never discuss the budget, never discuss it at all. I think a film should be like a painting, you like it or you don't, doesn't matter how thick the gouache is. You want in or you don't want in.

PRESS: Were any of your actors non-professionals?

VAN PEEBLES: I don't think so. I'm sure *they* don't.

PRESS: You didn't just pick up some people . . .

VAN PEEBLES: Well, some black people, but I don't think there's a black person in America who isn't an actor.

ORGAN: About that flash of titles at the end (*A Badass Nigger Is Coming Back To Collect Some Dues*). You show a totally brutalized society. Since the whites are obviously as done in as the blacks, in a different way, by having their souls ripped out, who is he going to collect dues *from*? Who's got anything left to give him?

VAN PEEBLES: Anybody that's been fucking over him. To collect dues . . . well, nothing happens outside of a, what should I say. . . a historical context. Normally, the film would have ended with him *almost* getting to the border and a little white girl coming along with a Hula Hoop down a dusty road and the sun would be backlit behind and her hair would be very platinum and she'd "La la la, la lahh." And then there would come a semi truck from the other way. Now she doesn't see the truck and the truck doesn't see her and she's almost getting hit by the truck, and here comes this big nigger, he can't let the little white girl get hit by the truck, right? He dives, pushes her out of the way, and of course *he* gets hit by the truck and falls into the ditch, right? Hmmm. And the sheriff comes, potbelly hangin over and says, "Weellll, nigger, I'm gonna tell the judge and he may go a little easier on you . . . four-hundred and fifty-two years stead of fifty-three." BOOM. Once again we'd have the moral victory, you know what I mean, but we'd lose. Fuck it. If the moral victory's so great, *they* can have it.

You have to understand that people come out of the film, *still* come up to me sometimes and say, "Did he get away?" They *know* he got away. It's *clear* he got away, but we just can't believe, because of the 982 *other* films where the guy ends up with a spiritual, or some white guy's sayin over his grave, "May he have not died in vain. May America be American." Meantime the poor cat, man, got his balls blown off, *every* time, you dig? Well I wanted to make it *super* clear, the position: That the cat was comin back, first . . . that he was alive, second. That's what it's all about. He's just comin back to kick ass in general.

ORGAN: There was that point, before that, in the desert, when you were using the church responses and it shifted into. . . call it a Greek Chorus.

VAN PEEBLES: Right. Now that point is a very interesting point where you're speaking of the Greek Chorus that happened. What happened in *my* mind — I explained it very clearly in the book . . . that section — that wasn't there, at all. . . it happened but there was no Greek Chorus. And one day I'm editing away and I hear these sweet voices. I say, "What the fuck? Where are those voices coming from?" And these are the voices in my head. And it all became very clear to me . . . what it was, it was the Bourgeois Colored Angels rappin to Sweetback like, "Sweetback, you can't do that uh . . . (Picks up book, finds place in it) It's very important what happened there. . . Yeah. The Colored Angels come in, Sweetback is runnin and the Colored Angels say

PROGRESS, SWEETBACK.

and Sweetback answer, THAT'S WHAT HE WANT YOU TO BELIEVE.

NO-PROGRESS, SWEETBACK.

and Sweetback says, HE AIN'T STOPPED CLUBBIN US FOR 400 YEARS AND HE DON'T INTEND TO FOR A MILLION.

and then the Colored Angels say, HE SUUURE TREAT US BAD, SWEETBACK.

and Sweetback says, WE CAN MAKE HIM DO US BETTER.

. . . then the Colored Angels begin to get into it ...

CHICKEN AIN'T NOTHIN BUT A BIRD

WHITE MAN AIN'T NOTHIN BUT A TURD

NIGGER AIN'T SHIT . . .

GOD'S GONNA TROUBLE THE WATER,

WADE IN THE WATER CHILDREN

WADE IN THE WATER CHILDREN

. . . then Sweetback . . . they've come to turn *him* around, but Sweetback is such a bad motherfucker until he turns *them* around, he says. . . GET MY HAND ON A TRIGGER.

. . .and then he frighten them again

YOU TALKIN REVOLUTION, SWEETBACK.

I WANT TO GET OFF THESE KNEES.

YOU TALKIN REVOLUTION, SWEETBACK.

SOMEBODY. — LISTEN TO ME.

. . .and then the Colored Angels repeat what they've learned. . .

IF HE CAN'T BURN YOU OUT, HE'LL STOMP YOU OUT. . . Sweetback,

HE WON'T WASTE ME.

LET IT SHINE, LET IT SHINE, LET IT SHINE.

Then the theme song. . .

HE BOPPED YOUR MAMA, HE BOPPED YOUR PAPPA — Sweetback says, BUT HE WON'T WASTE ME.

YOU CAN'T MAKE IT ON WINGS, WHEELS OR STEEL, SWEETBACK.

Sweetback, again, ain't givin in, says, WE GOT FEET. YOU CAN'T GET AWAY ON WINGS, WHEELS OR STEEL, SWEETBACK.

NIGGERS GOT FEET.

Once again, the fear comes up. . .

THEY BLED YOUR BROTHER, THEY BLED YOUR SISTER . . . YOUR BROTHER AND YOUR SISTER TOO. HOW COME IT TOOK ME SO LONG TO SEE HOW HE GETS US TO USE EACH OTHER?

And then the Colored Angels begin to admit things, say, NIGGERS SCARED.

Sweetback says, WE GOT TO GET IT TOGETHER. IF HE KICK A BROTHER, IT GOTTA BE LIKE HE KICKING YOUR MOTHER.

Then the Angels say, HE AIN'T GONNA LET YOU STAND TALL, SWEETBACK. THE MAN KNOWS EVERYTHING. THE MAN KNOWS EVERYTHING.

And then Sweetback says, THEN HE OUGHT TO KNOW I'M TIRED OF HIM FUCKIN WITH ME.

And at that point, he's brought it in so strong until the Colored Angels forget themselves and get out of their Lasagna bag, come right on down to Chitlinville and say, RUN MOTHER-FUCKER! HAUL YORE BLACK ASS!

Sweetback in turn is so strong until he's turned the Boojshies around, you dig where I'm comin from? He's given them back their pride. He's given them back their strength. Cause he's that bad. And that's what that whole section's about.

Now, many reviewers have seen the film and said, "Well it's loud," or "What was that mumbling in the desert?" because what he doesn't understand, a white person has to approach this film, if he's outside of the cultural understanding, as he'd approach a film of Kurosawa or Godard or, say, a Tunisian film. That desert sequence, often, a critic who's not together will say, "The long, the Greek Chorus where nothing happened." Well something *did* happen. Their whole voices . . . their enunciation from being in the Man's Pushing-for-an-honorary-White-Card bag . . . "You cannot stand tall, Sweetback" . . . they begin to bubbbubbbbbb, they all begin to get down . . . "C'mon, run muth'fucka."

PRESS: Were the sex scenes played by real actresses?

VAN PEEBLES: Ah, there, there. I caught the clap shooting the film.

ORGAN: Aside from breaking box office records, what do you hope the film will do?

VAN PEEBLES: The film will do two things. The box office records are really only part of making it a feasible project for Third World, guerrilla, disenfranchised, parallel movement people to make films. The Man has one extremely weak point . . . he has an Achilles pocketbook. It's *very* important to make bread. This is another hype he lays on us, that there's something *wrong* with making bread, but if you *don't* make bread, you can't get your message carried. Guys will even carry a *relevant* message if they figure they can make a quarter off of it. The box office *means* that it is feasible *now* for a cat to walk in and have an honest film, and *be listened to* and say, "Hey baby, you know about EASY RIDER . . ." This makes *twice* now. They kept sayin, "Well EASY RIDER's a fluke or JOE'S a fluke or this . . ." two, three, four things. It's adding up to a way he can no longer deny. And each one of these films was made completely outside of his circuit.

This proves, man, the cat's in his underwear. That's what's really important about this film, next to the message itself which is to de-colonize people's minds.

You got to see the brothers comin out of that film. I mean, in Harlem, the cats are goin up carryin their lunches. Instead of goin to the park, they go sit through three features. I know when it first came out in Detroit one critic wrote, "This is a film made for the idiots who scream 'Right on' at the unanswering silver screen." And the first night, man, the theater's packed everybody's yellin "RIGHT ON!" Turn it up above the popcorn, hey. That's what I make films for. I don't make films for those esoteric little cliques. I make it for the cat that goes there to cop a feel or maybe looks at the screen and begins to understand something . . . something opens in his head. That's what I'm all about. But to do that, you have to have your message carried. And that's where the grosses are important. This allows me to go in and say to the cat, "I demand this. I demand that." If I have not got the box office flat, I cannot demand dogshit.

PRESS: You've done three features now. What's the most important thing you've learned out of that?

VAN PEEBLES: Well, it has nothing to do with film or anything. It's just kick ass and take names. But I knew that all along.

PRESS: What encouragement would you give college students, especially blacks who are up against the wall, who want to make films?

VAN PEEBLES: I would say, you up against the wall, there *is* no chance, that type that maybe they're talkin about. Get out, you have to, only one place to look is in your motherfuckin self. We all say, "The Man is jive, the Man ain't shit, there ain't no Santa Claus" . . . and everybody's sittin on the chimney with a big stocking. Hey. Everybody always wants to win the war with white gloves on. . . you can't be revolutionary in the framework of bourgeoisie. It's one way or the other.

PRESS: How would you advise one to be revolutionary?

VAN PEEBLES: Put a couple chicks on the block, raise the money and make a film.

PRESS: Women's Lib wouldn't think it was very revolutionary.

VAN PEEBLES: Oh fuck Women's Lib.

PRESS: That's exploitation, man.

VAN PEEBLES: That's not exploitation at all.

PRESS: Half your audience is women.

VAN PEEBLES: That's right, and there's no possibility at the bottom level where the black people are that you can have a Women's Lib or Men's Lib . . . I'm for Human Lib.

PRESS: That's what Women's Lib is for.

VAN PEEBLES: Well fine then. I don't see the slightest bit of conflict. I mean I'd go out there and put things together for my old lady to get it together for her to make a film, man, sell my short or sell whatever you got. Do it however you can . . . get it together. By whatever means necessary.

PRESS: But you said, "Fuck Women's Lib."

VAN PEEBLES: That's right. That's what I said. There's no conflict . . . if you say that's Women's Lib, then I say Fuck Women's Lib. I don't say that's Women's Lib.

(At this point began a wearisome seminar on what is and is not Women's Lib, the use of words like 'chick' and 'nigger,' and the implications of making facetious remarks, such as the one which triggered it. Through the wonders of modern technology, we'll skip the instant foreplay replay and come back at the end of half-time festivities.)

VAN PEEBLES: Look. 1952 I was on the block and I got my bread together. And I do not mind going back on the block or putting someone else on the block — man, woman or child — to get the game together. Now if when I say *woman* everybody feels *especially* upset, tough shit. Cause that's where it's at. By whatever means necessary to get the game together, let's get it together. Now I'm speaking in a sort of shorthand, and if the implications of this shorthand you find repulsive? Hey, that's where I'm at. I am not interested in Women's Lib or Men's Lib as it *divides* us. I'm only interested in it as it *unites* us, and as we can get the Man's foot out of our ass generally. I think, especially black people, can't afford to get into the separation. I do not think Third World People, unless they *really* got their shit together, *very* heavy, that this doesn't really enter in to it . . . men-women. They have to be much bigger than that. Hey, I brought three women who had never seen a camera into the crew because women are just as disenfranchised as men. Why not? But that doesn't mean on the other hand, that they are any special thing so forth. Either you know it or you don't know it. Period.

Now. I'm not going to accept the *false* differentiation of disenfranchised that has been foisted on us. That is, the disenfranchised men and the disenfranchised women and the disenfranchised black and the disenfranchised this. . . there *are* the disenfranchised. If they can *see* the bond that holds them together, fine. Those who can't, too bad.

THE ORGAN: You said you were on the block in 1952.

VAN PEEBLES: Yeah, I was a Midnight Cowboy. I used to fuck cats in the ass for 10 dollars. But I got the money so I could get it together.

I feel, when we get caught up, I'm not worried about the semantics of the thing. I'm just worried about gettin it done. Whoever calls the shots. My movement for the moment is to make technicians and technology available to us . . . to the disenfranchised forces, to go into the clarifications such as the young lady went into. That's unfortunately not my end of the stick . . . or fortunately. I don't know. I just, in a very gross way, work for the decolonization of the mind.

(A few days later, after much conversation, defining various scenes, and most specifically after reading a review which termed the film "Propaganda," I asked him to put a tail on tape.)

VAN PEEBLES: It's all those cats who can't see past their own. . . like at Columbia, when they wanted me to do the Malcolm X story, and they wanted to read the script to see if I had the right slant on a brother. He says, "We'll have to see if you have the right concept. Have you read the book?" I said, "I didn't read the book . . . I *lived* the book."

Like the cat . . . when you're doing anything that goes along with their point of view, then it's "touching," it has "human nuances." When they don't dig it, then it's propaganda. Knickerbocker comes out and says . . . he's trying to put me down . . . Eichlebaum, so forth . . . or help me along . . . but he can't even get into it because he can't even quote correctly what's written on the film. "This film is dedicated to all the brothers and sisters who had enough of the Man." They have to say, "This film is dedicated to all the brothers and sisters who *have* had enough of the Man." By the very fact that they've had to make that switch, hm?, they've lost part of the message. By slavishly following another medium, which is *not* the medium this is made for. You dig where I'm coming from?

It was what I was talkin about with that other cat today . . . longhairs say this is anti-longhair. Black women say this film is anti-black women, bourgeois says this film is anti-black men, but what no one sees is this film is pro-reality. I mean, we got a lot of cleanin-up to do, is where it's at.

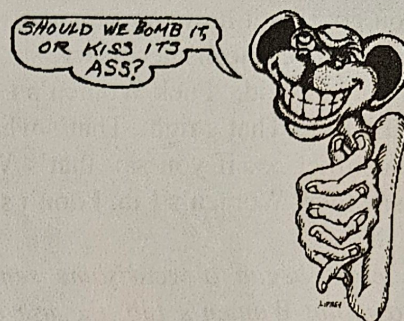
ORGAN: What's next? Do you have another film in mind?

VAN PEEBLES: I got a lot of films in mind. Actually what's happening, you can't see it, but there's this big fight raging in my head . . . my various muses are having a board meeting now, deciding who has priority over the next project, and I'm gonna let them fight it out, man. What I'm gonna do is try and find some quiet place for them to have their final board meeting in the middle of the desert, and I'll sit out there and let them have their meeting and see what they come to. (Laughs) In other words,

I'm right back where I started, headed for the desert on a mission.

Was Sweetback successful in the long run? Supposedly, the movie Shaft (from the book written by Ernest Tidyman about a black detective) was originally to have a white actor in the role — Darren McGavin, people say. The success of Sweetback allowed African-American director Gordon Parks to justify casting a black actor — Richard Roundtree — in the role. Melvin Van Peebles has told that story quite a few times, and if it's true, it's definitely something to brag about. There were, many people may have noticed, a few more blaxploitation mov-

ies made in the years after that. However, Sweetback was the first blaxploitation movie since the 1930's to be produced and directed by an African-American.



REVIEW

GLEN AND RANDA A movie with actors by Jim McBride . . . Distributed by UMC

The ads say 'God Forbid' in an effete New-York-Living-Room way, but I remember a friend sitting on a hill in Marin, looking at the freak colony below and asking if they "really had to go *all* the way to the animal level. Yes," he finally concluded, "I suppose they did." Perhaps things are different in Marin. In New York, reality is so often just an unassisted scream away, and nobody really wants to know about *that*.

The film: squatting naked New Man hacking with stone tools, playing Paleolithic games in the post-nuclear cemetery of a fatuous civilization which left little behind but portable toilets and strange concrete paths. Wandering across the Death-Life fields, cars becoming velvet trees, Glen and Rwanda in New Eden, pre-digested apple waiting in their way . . . a quest for the CITY, whatever that is, or was . . . a dream of future-past, undefined until the advent of the Magus. Garry Goodrow (ah, those Committee people) in a dream-shattering role as true charlatan-guru, bag full of tricks, mind full of hurt, mouth full of much-obliged's, looking for an angle and a tired fuck, watching over his shoulder all the while.

He gives Glen (Steve Curry) the time to crystallize his dream in order to make a nookie-grab on Randa (Shelley Plimpton). "You're too good for slavery, Prince Valiant," he tells our hero, "I'll give you a quest." And Glen goes outside the tent to rip off Wonder Woman Comics and find his cartoon . . . Metropolis. The quest is defined.

Like all quests, it turns into a self-centered static electricity obsession, bringing it all down to Level One . . . survival, anyway you can, a point of reality you either dig or run away from, but it's there. And while the fearful cries of "That's not joyous . . . that's not groovy" react to it, Stan Cotton's gentle reminder echoes, "Eat a little meat

now and then, you vegetarians, to re-tie the bond with your ancestors, who ate bark and insects and each other, that you might evolve to your vegetarianism."

The film moves casually, unhurried wink-dissolves adding to a silent movie impression . . . moves pointlessly to say something about pointless quests . . . to say very definite somethings about death. And Glen and Randa themselves move namelessly, saying something about themselves, about how obsession blinds and embitters and comes between people. People who, even after a thermo-nuclear morality lesson, still fall for the sucker-bait of CITY. The suggestion of dreams, the creation of fantasy generates a bond of mutual love and energy . . . the obsessive imposition of that fantasy spends the love, drains the energy, and ultimately, severs all human bonds.

Jim McBride has been careful to imply and not impose this fantasy . . . all the technical devices and scripting moving toward presentation of an understanding of a world where the conflict between bare survival and the carrying of the dream-grail are clearly defined. Still, the promo men take meaning and turn it into Product, sitting in their front rooms saying "God Forbid," as they did before to those who turned their backs on the concrete dream, and as they have always done and always will do, to anyone who would give them a view of their disease. The advertising has nothing to do with the film, except for the reference to 2001 in it. Not in the 7 billion dollar special effects trip, but on a personal vision level, GLEN AND RANDA holds its own with 2001, in fact is superior by refusing to cop out into ambiguity.

But, as mentioned, a lot of people can't dig it, mostly the ones who are afraid of its implications. GLEN AND RANDA is an easy-moving film for people who want to sit back and see something. As Madame Blavatsky said, after being persuaded to publish *The Secret Doctrine*, "Those who have eyes will see, and those who have ears will hear."

Howard Pearlstein